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March 8, 1959



MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT
March 8, 1959 - 5:00 PM

Others present: Vice President Nixon
Secretary Herter
Secretary McElroy
Mr. Allen Dulles
Senator Wiley
Senator Saltonstall
Senator Russell
Senator Fulbright
Representative Arends
Representative Carnahan
Representative Vinson
Representative Chipenfield
General Persons
Mr. Harlow
Major Eisenhower

The President opened the meeting with some introductory remarks on its purpose, which was, primarily, to ensure that the Executive and Legislative branches of the government were thinking alike on the subject of the complicated and serious situation which has been brought about by the precipitation of the Berlin crisis by the Soviets.

The President then asked Mr. Allen Dulles to brief the group on the intelligence aspects of the situation. The briefing which had been given to Members of Congress in the morning session was then repeated by Mr. Dulles for the benefit of this group.

DECLASSIFIED

E.O. 12065, Sec. 3-204

PORTIONS EXEMPTED

E.O. 12065, Sec. 1-301 (b)-(d)

EXC 9/25/81, CIA 5/14/80, 000 8/6/80

NLE Date 12/8/81

By DJH Date 12/10/81

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Secretary Herter then added a thought with regard to this peace treaty. The Soviets are continually emphasizing the signing of a peace treaty with the GDR. Actually, they already have one; what they really mean is that they plan to relinquish those privileges which they have heretofore reserved for themselves under the treaty which they have already signed.

The President then requested Secretary McElroy to give a rundown on the status of our contingency planning on Berlin. He reviewed activities in the Department of Defense, which include specific planning for contingencies varying from minimum to maximum interference. Defense has considered various mixes as to the use of force. It has considered the use of ground vs. air accesses. Since Khrushchev has threatened interference on both ground and air access routes, Defense is planning on a combination of impediments. This planning is being conducted concurrently in the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon and in NATO.

Mr. McElroy pointed out that the basic principle being followed is to plan quietly, but to ensure that we have strength available. He emphasized the necessity to bring allies into accord with what we are doing.

This very need for allied accord is what necessitates that we be quiet and refrain from committing ourselves in public. This may give the false impression that we are doing nothing. Examples of the type of questions which face Defense are whether we should plan on reinforcing our forces in Europe prior to the May 27th deadline, whether we should evacuate civilians from Berlin, etc. Mr. McElroy stressed that although these problems have not yet come to a head, we are approaching them as if decision were required tomorrow.

Mr. Vinson brought up the question of the use of force; will we use force to hold the ground if necessary? To this the President again pointed out the impact of world opinion and our policy that we will refrain from initiating the use of force. He pointed out the efficacy of passive resistance on the part of the GDR. He assured Mr. Vinson that we will use force if necessary; but we are not, prior to a need for its use, going to threaten the Soviets. Mr. Vinson agreed that we will not give one inch and that preparations must be done quietly. He expressed the opinion that bringing dependents out of Berlin would have a serious impact on the world. The President informed him that we are not planning to evacuate dependents right now.

Mr. Vinson then expressed his objections to current talk of force reduction. He feels we should map out a program for the use of force if such is needed. This view afforded the President an opportunity to outline his basic philosophy, which is that the Soviets are engaged in confronting the U.S. with a series of crises. The U.S. has a need for an efficient military system, which must be coordinated throughout the government. It must be realized that if we program for the sum total of recommendations which are submitted to the Executive, the mounting burden would call for full mobilization and eventually a garrison state. Our military posture has been the product of years of figuring. The U.S. contribution to world security will be to furnish the reserves, production capability, etc. The bulk of the ground forces will be supplied by our allies. This does mean, he admits, that we will not have ground forces to match those of the Soviets. Here Mr. Vinson reiterated his point of the apparent contradiction in reducing forces, while at the same time making preparations to fight. To this the President stated his conviction that the Soviets count on an easy victory for them through economic measures. They desire us to overreact and to depart from our well-laid-out defense plans. The President assured the Members that he has no sacrosanct solution to this situation, and the purpose of the conference is to elicit their ideas. However, he

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went on to assert that Berlin should not throw us off balance and render us hysterical. We are going to live with this type of crisis for years. Mr. Vinson conceded that we should make our preparations cautiously and quietly, so as to avoid getting the country excited. <

At the President's request, Secretary Herter then outlined the U.S. position from a diplomatic view. Our record of willingness to negotiate is clear. Furthermore, our record with respect to Berlin is good. Berlin is living well, and there had been a minimum of international incidents arising over that city up to the time that the Soviets opened the issue. As the result, probably, of the trips abroad made by Secretary Dulles and Prime Minister Macmillan, it would appear that the attitude of the Soviets has softened to some extent with respect to:

1. broadening of the issue to include all of Germany as well as Berlin,
2. the conducting of a foreign ministers' meeting, and
3. a peace treaty for Germany.



The Western nations are now concerting their positions. Our position is, of course, based on the premise that we will not move an inch from our rights. We are seriously contemplating the use which might be made of the United Nations in this matter, since this crisis affects the position of all our allies and not just the four powers involved. Macmillan is going to Paris and Bonn before coming to the U.S. Here he will discuss the broadest aspects of the problem which will be discussed with the Soviets. Any agreement which we reach with the Soviets must provide basically that Berlin must not lose out by that agreement. We have commitments to Berlin, as do the Soviets. Secretary Herter concluded by pointing out that we are studying the prospects of a disengagement in Europe. In this difficult question, the Western allies must act in concert.

Senator Russell then commented that from Secretary Herter's discussion, he had gotten the impression that we do not have complete agreement with our allies. Secretary Herter stated that our allied positions are close, from a military point of view. Here the President took over the discussion by pointing out that every day a new facet to the problem turns up. This is a particularly difficult feature of dealing with allies. He confirmed

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that our problem from a military viewpoint is all right, since it is based on a continuing emergency war plan with which our positions are extremely close, particularly in the case of Great Britain. Secretary McElroy added that our military position is close with France and Germany also; but with these allies, our political position is in need of further coordinating.

Senator Russell then asked whether Berlin is part of NATO. To this he was assured by Secretary Herter that an attack on Berlin is considered by our NATO allies as an attack on themselves. Senator Russell then stated that the Soviets would be insane if they would initiate hostilities on Berlin, but he expressed concern over the situation which would ensue from trouble with the GDR. This would have had repercussions in public opinion. He asked whether we "clobber" the GDR. (Secretary Herter agreed that the Soviets have declared their intention to back up the GDR.) Senator Russell expressed dismay at the prospect of fighting on the ground where we have no chance.

Here the President expressed his basic philosophy of the necessity for the U.S. to be willing to "push its whole stack of chips into the pot" when such becomes necessary.

The President, Senator Russell, and Mr. Vinson agreed that if war comes, it will be an all-out war.

Senator Fulbright then brought up the difficult question of limited non-military harassment on the part of the GDR. Specifically, he asked what we do if they blow the autobahn bridges. Senator Russell quickly responded with a solution of sending in an engineer company to construct a Bailey bridge. Senator Fulbright continued with his example. If the GDR fires rifles at this engineer company, do we then respond with the use of atomic weapons? The Senator admitted he was somewhat lost on our sequence of actions. The President here admitted that our course of action is not entirely clear. What we do will depend on the actual events as they occur. He pointed out, however, that once a contingency of this type occurs, it is too late to approach the United Nations. Any use of the United Nations must occur while our existing status quo is in effect. If the situation as it faces the U.S. is serious, the President remarked, the President would recommend to Congress that we go into general war.



With haste, Senator Russell assured the President that consultation with Congress would not be necessary, but that the initiative is his and Congress will support it.

Senator Russell then asked the President whether there is anything which he required of the Congress in the way of help. To this the President replied in the negative, adding that the worst possible thing we could have right now would be a resolution from Congress on the use of military force. The approach, in his view, is to treat this entire crisis as an additional evidence of Soviet intransigence.

Senator Russell then asked whether, in the President's view, we require more military forces. The President answered that nothing is needed. A mobilization would probably provide us two or three more divisions with which to counter the Soviet force of 175. This makes no sense. He expressed the conviction that the actual decision to go to all-out war will not come, but if it does come, we must have the crust to follow through. The President expressed appreciation for the constructive attitude which Congress has shown thus far. He admitted there is no easy answer, but added that he does not think we will fail.

Senator Saltonstall then inquired as to the attitude of our allies in the matter of general war. The President answered that de Gaulle will stand with us. De Gaulle is a man who views everything in terms of black and white. He will stand firm. The British, however, are in a close political situation. The Laborites apparently feel that they can please Khrushchev. Their attitude bears some resemblance to that of Neville Chamberlain. However, the President feels that this current trip to Moscow will toughen Macmillan. As to Adenauer, the President recognized the fact that he has been somewhat undercut recently. Basically, Adenauer is extremely tough, however, and the President is certain he will stand firm.



Senator Wiley then referred back to our motto of the Revolutionary War, which is to "keep our powder dry." He asked whether all services are on immediate alert. In such case, the Soviets would not dare to initiate hostilities. The President pointed out the difficulty of keeping everybody on a maximum alert at all times. He pointed out that once this becomes necessary, forces will be so placed.

Mr. Chipfield then brought up the question of prospects for favorable settlement by negotiation. The President answered that such prospects for favorable settlement by negotiation. The President answered that such prospects are very slight. He cited as the chief advantage to negotiation the fact that we will continue the status quo past the artificial deadline laid down by the Soviets. He referred to the Overstreet book, What We Should Know About Communism. The President went into our long-term policy of holding the line until the Soviets manage to educate their people. By so doing, they will sow the seeds of destruction of Communism as a virulent power. This will take a long time to settle. In an attempt to place the Berlin crisis in perspective, the President pointed out the possibility that the main interest of the Communists may be the Middle East, with this crisis perpetrated as a diversion.

Mr. Arends then expressed his satisfaction at the President's statement that we are in a position of strength. He pointed out that the President is the man who can speak with authority on this subject, but that it is the responsibility of the legislators present to support this stand. The President expressed his disgust with the idea of considering ourselves weak after nine years of gigantic efforts to strengthen our defenses. Here Senator Fulbright asked the question directly whether the President is satisfied with the state of our forces and the state of our planning. The President answered with a qualified yes. Our unilateral planning is satisfactory. There are, however, problems inherent in the position of the leader of a coalition of free nations.

The President then took this opportunity to say a few words about mutual security. He clarified rumors to the effect that Congress was hoping to

effect savings out of funds requested for mutual security. He stated that he would rather see the Congress take a couple of billion dollars from Mr. McElroy than a couple of billion from mutual security. Again, he pointed out that his view is not sacrosanct, but it does represent a conviction which he has attained from living with this a long time. Mutual security performs three functions:

1. it expresses the U.S. interest in the welfare of the nations of the free world,
2. it increases the capability of allied defense forces, and
3. it gives people the will to stand up against the Soviets.



Here, at the President's instigation, followed an expression of disagreement, light in tone, between him and Senator Russell. Senator Russell stated approval of a reasonable amount of mutual security, but granted that this was a most wasteful expenditure of money. The President pointed out that the provision of mutual security is a new responsibility for which we have only ten years of experience and that the U.S. military services are far more wasteful than our mutual security program. Therefore, by Senator Russell's criterion, we should do away with our military forces. He pointed out that he has appointed a committee, in which his political opponents are well represented, to study the entire question of mutual security. The President predicted that they will tell him when they conclude that he has been parsimonious in this regard. The President stated that if we desire to abolish mutual security and to provide instead some 80 or 90 divisions, deployed around the Soviet Union, this course of action will solve our unemployment problem, but will ensure that we are a garrison state. Senator Russell stated that in view of the many discussions that he had held in the past, he did not desire to waste the time of this group by a debate right now.

Mr. Vinson then reverted to the subject of negotiations, which he hopes will be effective, and again asked the President whether we have plans for our exact course of action in the event of the failure of negotiations. The President answered that we do. Here Mr. Dulles brought up the third possibility, which he considers most likely. This assumes that there will be no agreement. Mr. Khrushchev will tell Ulbricht to take over Soviet functions with regard to access controls, but to be nice. The President agreed. Mr. McElroy again pointed out that this would fit into the Soviet policy of maintaining continuing tensions which we

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must live with, probably, for a generation. Secretary Herter threw in a comment about the "slippery slope" of continued dealings with the GDR.

Here the President pointed out the phrase in the Declaration of Independence which stated as one of human rights, that of pursuit of happiness. The President applies this to the present situation by stating that we should not worry the public unnecessarily. Instead, we should show them courage and confidence. Mr. McElroy added that even the armed forces cannot stay on constant alert.

Senator Fulbright then brought up the problem of his constituents. They asked him why we are cutting the Army. The Senator admits that he is not speaking from a hardheaded military viewpoint, but is concerned over the psychological impact of force cuts. To him it looks strange. The President admitted that we are going on with our cut of 30,000 men from the Army. He pointed out, however, the large amounts of money which we are spending for ICBMs. As regards these ICBMs, the experts say we should not program more, but should, rather, create more sites and provide them with hardening. The U.S. has the problem, of course, of purchasing the sites which will be used for these weapons. Each successive ICBM, furthermore, will require new design of launching sites. The President expressed wonder why human sense cannot keep up with human inventive ingenuity. Senator Fulbright hastily added that his constituents do not keep up. They do not understand ICBMs, but they do understand 30,000 soldiers.

Mr. Vinson then asked when the diplomats start work. The President said that our Western diplomats will begin to meet on the 19th. In reviewing the negotiation prospects with the Vice President and Secretary Herter, he pointed out the chances are quite good for a meeting of foreign ministers with the Soviets in the light of Khrushchev's recent message that the diplomats of the world, including those of the Soviet Union, are aware of our determination to accept war if necessary. In answer to Senator Fulbright's question, the President repeated his stand that no resolution from Congress would be welcome at this time. Mr. Vinson again voiced his opinion that we should not withdraw dependents at this time. The President once more agreed.

The President stated that he would like to make one more point, particularly with the two committee chairmen. The Administration knows

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that most of the facts available to us are also available in the newspapers. Therefore, we sometimes tend to overestimate the amount of knowledge available to the Congress. The President emphasized that if the Members present ever feel that the Executive is remiss in informing them, they should call him directly and he will arrange for them to come see him. To this Mr. Vinson assured the President that they had recently received an excellent briefing, which had convinced him of our great military capability and the futility of considering limited action in the Berlin crisis.

The Vice President then referred to the President's remark on the statesmanlike restraint shown up to this time by the Congress. He desired to add his approval of this restraint, in the light of the help it gives to our allies. Our allies are strong but need assurance of our unity of purpose.

Mr. Vinson then reviewed the essence of this meeting, which is that our intentions are peaceful, but we are ready to "cross the bridge" if necessary. The President agreed, emphasizing the peaceful intentions.

A discussion then followed as to the dissemination of information in this meeting, whether it should be on or off the record, and whether the list of those attending should be released. Here the President advised that when Members of Congress are asked specifically in this regard, they say that they attended an off-the-record briefing at the White House on our foreign policy situation.

John S D Eisenhower
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